

Entire council sessions go online

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ROCKVILLE -- Montgomery County residents can now check on council members' votes on any issue and catch all or parts of a session dealing with a specific topic by going online.

"We are making Montgomery County government more accessible to the people" council president Tom Perez said Monday.

With the new technology, Web users can access video as well as read full transcripts of past council meetings.

Standing near a huge screen illustrating an array of choices that can be accessed from anywhere in the world on a new system called "Pictron," Mr. Perez said the new technology is answering citizen calls for "easy access to more open and transparent government.

"Information is indeed power," Mr. Perez said. "The more people know what's going on with their county government, the better off we all are."

He said "residents will no longer have to scour pages and pages for a particular issue. They can call up topics, such as agricultural preservation, senior citizens or Clarksburg and be fully informed. Residents can search among various council meetings and also search by topic and word to get right to the part of the (video) clip or transcript they are interested in."

He said they can, for example, see that Clarksburg will be on the agenda Jan. 17.

"The onus is on us to make sure people are notified. They can watch a video at their own convenience."

Regular council sessions are televised live on the county's Cable Channel 6.

Residents can sign on for emails to give them notice about the council's meeting schedules and when a particular matter will be up for a public hearing, discussion or a final vote.

They can also sign up on a "list page" to receive council agendas, public meeting notices or news releases.

Calling it "a very significant innovation to produce open government," Mr. Perez said less than a handful of municipalities in the United States use the system. One of the first and the largest to use it is the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.

The hookup cost about \$40,000. Council Staff Director Steve Farber said the county saved about \$140,000 in clerical salaries by revamping the clerks office. No one has been laid off.

The text of council bills, resolutions and zoning text amendments, as well as advance copies of analysts' packets and

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materials used by council members during sessions are already on the council's Web site.

Montgomery County's new Pictron system can be accessed through the council's Web site:
www.montgomerycountymd.gov/council.

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